A FAMILY. A CONVERSATION.
JUST THIS ONCE
How many "just this once" make a life?
A ONE-SCENE PLAY BY
EK NOOR

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By Ek Noor

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Characters List

RAKESH MEHTA - Father, early 60s. Calm, measured, believes he is reasonable.

POOJA MEHTA - Mother, late 50s. Loving, anxious, attentive to social perception.

AMIT MEHTA - Elder brother, mid-30s. Conflict-avoidant, thoughtful, hesitant to challenge.

KAVYA MEHTA - Amit's wife, 28. From a more traditional background; believes adjustment is maturity and stability.

TARA MEHTA - Daughter, 28. Educated, composed, carrying the weight of past compromises.

JUST THIS ONCE

Setting

A family dining table. Five chairs. Tea set. Plates of snacks, mostly untouched. Afternoon.

*(**RAKESH** is seated at the dining table, aligning a spoon. **POOJA** moves in and out, adjusting plates. **AMIT** sits with his phone. **KAVYA** sits composed, observing.)*

(A pause.)

POOJA: **AMIT**, put your phone away.

AMIT: I'm not on it.

POOJA: You are looking at it.

AMIT: I'm holding it.

RAKESH: Then hold it less suspiciously.

*(**AMIT** puts it down. **KAVYA** gives a faint smile.)*

KAVYA: Can I help with anything?

POOJA: No, no, it's done.

(She notices a bowl is slightly off-centre. Fixes it.)

RAKESH: Where is **TARA**?

POOJA: She said five minutes.

AMIT: That was fifteen minutes ago.

POOJA: She's coming.

(A pause.)

KAVYA: Maybe she knows.

(A tiny shift in the room.)

RAKESH: Knows what?

KAVYA: That this is not just tea.

POOJA: Why do you say it like that?

KAVYA: Because it isn't.

(Silence.)

AMIT: We could have just told her normally.

POOJA: This is normally.

AMIT: Mum, when the table is laid like it's Diwali and everyone is sitting as if the bank is repossessing the house, it doesn't feel normal.

RAKESH: Don't be dramatic.

AMIT: I'm not being dramatic. I'm describing the atmosphere.

*(**TARA** enters. She has her bag with her. She stops just long enough to take in the room.)*

TARA: Oh good. A tribunal.

POOJA: **TARA**...

TARA: Sorry. Family discussion.

(*She puts her bag down. She does not sit immediately.)*

RAKESH: Sit down.

TARA: That sounded encouraging.

*(She sits. **POOJA** quickly pours her tea.)*

POOJA: Have tea first.

TARA: Should I drink it before or after, my future is discussed?

POOJA: Why do you always start like this?

TARA: I've just come in.

(A pause. Tara lifts the cup but doesn't drink.)

RAKESH: No one is discussing your future as if you're not here.

TARA: That's reassuringly modern.

*(**AMIT** looks down. **KAVYA** glances at him, then at **TARA**)*

POOJA: We only want to talk.

TARA: That sentence has never once brought peace to this house.

(A beat.)

RAKESH: Fine. Then let us be direct.

(He folds his hands.)

There has been an approach.

(Silence.)

TARA: An approach.

POOJA: A family has asked about you.

TARA: Of course they have.

POOJA: Don’t say it like that.

TARA: How should I say it?

POOJA: Normally.

TARA: What is the normal tone for being circulated?

AMIT: **TARA**...

TARA: No, I’m asking. Should I sound grateful? Flattered? Available?

RAKESH: Enough.

*(A pause. **TARA** sets her cup down very carefully.)*

RAKESH: This is a good family.

TARA: I’m sure they are.

POOJA: Educated. Settled. Good reputation.

TARA: The holy trinity.

KAVYA: At least listen.

TARA: I am listening.

KAVYA: No. You’re waiting to dismiss it.

TARA: That saves time.

POOJA: There is no need to be rude.

TARA: There is also no need for this conversation, and yet here we all are.

(A pause.)

RAKESH: You could try and meet them.

TARA: No.

*(Silence. **POOJA** looks wounded as if struck.)*

POOJA: Just like that?

TARA: Yes. It’s one of the benefits of adulthood. It can be very efficient.

RAKESH: You haven’t even heard properly.

TARA: I heard enough.

POOJA: You don’t know the boy.

TARA: And I don’t want to.

(A longer pause.)

RAKESH: Is this because of that boy?

*(**TARA** looks at him.)*

TARA: His name is Neil.

*(Silence. **POOJA** closes her eyes very briefly.)*

POOJA: Why do you say it so openly?

TARA: Because secrecy is exhausting.

RAKESH: We are not talking about secrecy. We are talking about sense.

TARA: No. You are talking about discomfort and calling it sense.

AMIT: **TARA**, maybe just...

TARA: No, **AMIT.** Not “maybe just.” Please.

(He stops.)

POOJA: We are trying to protect you.

TARA: From what?

POOJA: From making life harder than it needs to be.

TARA: By making it smaller than it needs to be?

KAVYA: That’s unfair.

TARA: Is it?

KAVYA: Yes. Your parents are not stopping you from living your life.

They’re asking you to think properly.

TARA: Properly?

KAVYA: Practically.

TARA: That word always arrives just before someone asks me to give something up.

(A pause.)

RAKESH: Neil is from a different background.

TARA: Same religion.

POOJA: That is not the only thing.

TARA: No. The language is different.

The food is different.

The relatives will pronounce our names differently.

I know the drill.

POOJA: Don’t mock.

TARA: I’m summarising.

RAKESH: You are reducing serious matters to clever lines.

TARA: And you are reducing my life to compatibility charts with snacks.

*(**AMIT** almost laughs, then stops when no one else does.)*

POOJA: See? Everything becomes a joke for you.

TARA: No. If it were a joke, it would be funny.

(A beat.)

RAKESH: This is exactly the immaturity I was afraid of.

TARA: Immaturity. At twenty-eight. Excellent.

We’ve moved from daughter to child very smoothly.

POOJA: Why are you forcing every word to become ugly?

TARA: Because I’m tired of ugly things being called beautiful when they are wrapped nicely.

(Silence.)

KAVYA: Can I say something?

TARA: I feel that’s not really a question.

KAVYA: I understand more than you think.

TARA: Do you?

KAVYA: Yes.

(She leans forward slightly.)

When I got married, I had to adjust to this house too.

New people.

New routines. New expectations.

That is normal. Every marriage needs adjustment.

TARA: From both sides?

KAVYA: Ideally, yes.

TARA: Ideally is doing a lot of work there.

*(**KAVYA** absorbs that.)*

KAVYA: I’m saying no life comes ready-made.

At some point, you choose peace over proving a point.

TARA: And how is that going for you?

*(A stillness. **AMIT** looks up sharply.)*

AMIT: **TARA**...

KAVYA: No, let her ask.

*(To **TARA**.)*
It is going fine.

TARA: Fine.

KAVYA: Yes.

TARA: That's not the same as happy.

POOJA: Why are you dragging her marriage into this?

TARA: She brought it in.

RAKESH: Enough. This is not about **AMIT** and **KAVYA**.

TARA: No. It's never about the example standing right in front of us.

(Pause.)

RAKESH: You met this boy at work.

TARA: Yes.

RAKESH: How long has this been going on?

TARA: A year.

POOJA: A year.

(The hurt in her voice is real.)
A whole year and you said nothing.

TARA: Because I know this family.

I wanted one year where something belonged only to me.

(A pause.)

POOJA: We are your family.

TARA: Exactly.

(That lands.)

AMIT: Does he… know about all this?

TARA: He knows enough.

RAKESH: And what does "enough" mean?

TARA: That I love him.

That my parents are educated.

Kind. Generous.

And deeply uncomfortable with anything they did not choose first.

(A pause.)

RAKESH: That is insulting.

TARA: Is it inaccurate?

(Silence.)

POOJA: We let you study.

*(**TARA** turns slowly to her.)*

TARA: You let me study.

POOJA: You know what I mean.

TARA: No, actually, say it properly.

POOJA: Don't speak to me like that.

TARA: Mum, you just said "we let you study" as if you signed a permission slip in 1892.

RAKESH: Your mother means we supported you. We have given you every opportunity.

TARA: No. Not every opportunity.

(A beat. No one moves.)

TARA: I wanted to go to Imperial.

(Silence.)

POOJA: **TARA**...

TARA: No. Let's say it properly. Since everyone is being proper.

*(To **RAKESH**)*
I wanted to go to Imperial College London.

*(To **POOJA.**)*

You cried for three days.

(To both.)
You said London was too far.

Too fast. Too unsafe. Too expensive. Too lonely. Too everything.

POOJA: We were worried.

TARA: You were uncomfortable.

RAKESH: You went to a very good university.

TARA: In our hometown.

RAKESH: And did very well.

TARA: That is not the same thing.

POOJA: We did what we thought was best.

TARA: For whom?

(Silence.)

POOJA: For you.

TARA: No. For your peace of mind.

(A pause.)

RAKESH: Every parent has a right to worry.

TARA: Yes. But worry should not get to make all the decisions.

KAVYA: But parents do see things children don't.

TARA: Children.

KAVYA: You know what I mean.

TARA: No, I know exactly what you mean.

*(She turns to **KAVYA** fully now.)*

You mean obedience sounds wiser when you call it respect.

*(**KAVYA** stiffens.)*

AMIT: Can we not attack each other?

TARA: I'm not attacking. I'm translating.

RAKESH: Enough with these lines.

TARA: Then stop handing them to me.

(Silence.)

POOJA: We are not your enemies.

TARA: I know.

POOJA: Then why are you sitting like this? As if we are trying to ruin your life?

TARA: Because every time I want something, this family turns it into a moral test.

(A beat.)

AMIT: That's not fair.

TARA: Really?

AMIT: No one forced you.

TARA: No one had to.

(He falls quiet.)

TARA: That's the clever part.

(Silence.)

You don't shout. You don't threaten. You don't forbid.

You just sit me down with tea and concern and disappointment…
until what I want starts to feel selfish.

(A long pause.)

POOJA: That is a horrible thing to say.

TARA: It is a horrible thing to learn.

(Silence.)

RAKESH: No one is forbidding anything now.

TARA: No. You're only asking me to meet a boy from a "good family."

To think practically. To keep an open mind. To not be hasty.

To consider language, culture, adjustment, future children, extended family,

social ease, community comfort...

POOJA: Because these things matter.

TARA: To you.

RAKESH: To life.

TARA: To control.

(A pause.)

KAVYA: That is such an ugly word.

TARA: That doesn't make it the wrong one.

POOJA: So now your parents are controlling because we want stability for you?

TARA: You don't want stability. You want recognisability.

(Silence.)

RAKESH: Explain.

TARA: You want a family that feels familiar.

A son-in-law whose house you can walk into and instantly understand.

Whose mother speaks like you. Whose aunties eat like you.

Whose weddings sound like yours. Whose jokes make sense to you.

Whose differences do not ask anything of you.

(A beat.)

TARA: You don’t want risk. You want a mirror.

(No one speaks.)

POOJA: And what is wrong with wanting ease for our daughter?

TARA: Nothing. Unless the price of your ease is my life.

(A silence that sits.)

AMIT: Maybe… maybe they’re just scared.

(Everyone turns to him. He almost regrets speaking.)

RAKESH: **S**cared of what?

AMIT: Of things being different.

POOJA: Different is not automatically good.

AMIT: I didn’t say it was.

KAVYA: Then what are you saying?

AMIT: I’m saying… maybe **TARA** isn’t wrong that sometimes we…

make comfort sound like wisdom.

*(A pause. **RAKESH** stares at him.)*

RAKESH: And you have suddenly become very brave.

AMIT: No. Not brave.

(A beat.)
Just tired.

(That lands more heavily than expected.)

POOJA: Tired of what?

AMIT: Of every conversation being about love but somehow ending with fear.

(Silence.)

KAVYA: **AMIT**…

AMIT: What?

KAVYA: Think before you speak.

AMIT: I am. For once.

*(**KAVYA** looks away.)*

POOJA: This is what happens.

One person says one thing and suddenly everyone starts talking as if...

this house is a prison.

TARA: No one said prison.

POOJA: You don’t have to say it.

TARA: Mum...

POOJA: No, **TARA**. Enough. We have loved you, worried for you, sacrificed for you...

TARA: And I’m grateful.

POOJA: Then show it.

(A hard silence.)

TARA: There it is.

POOJA: What?

TARA: The invoice.

*(**POOJA** recoils.)*

RAKESH: Apologise.

TARA: No.

RAKESH: **TARA**...

TARA: No.

(*She stands. Not wildly. Quietly.)*

I am so tired of gratitude being used as a leash.

(Silence.)

POOJA: Leash.

TARA: Yes.

RAKESH: **S**it down.

TARA: I have sat down for years.

(A pause.)

TARA: I didn’t go to Imperial because it would upset you.

I stayed local because it would reassure you.

I came home early.

I answered calls.

I softened language.

I made myself understandable.

I have been translating myself into your comfort for over ten years.

(Silence. No one interrupts.)

TARA: And every single time, it was presented to me the same way.

(She looks at each of them.)

Just this once.

(A beat.)

TARA: Just this once, stay nearby.
Just this once, don't argue.
Just this once, wear this.
Just this once, meet them.
Just this once, think of us.
Just this once, keep the peace.

(She lets it sit.)

TARA: How many "just this once" makes a life?

(No one answers.)

KAVYA: Life is compromise.

TARA: For whom?

KAVYA: For everyone.

TARA: No.

(A beat.)

TARA: For some people, compromise is a lesson.
For others, it becomes a personality.

*(**KAVYA** goes still.)*

AMIT: **TARA**…

TARA: No, **AMIT**. Please. Don't soften this for them. Not today.

(He stops.)

RAKESH: What do you want from us?

TARA: Nothing.

POOJA: That is not true.

TARA: No. It is finally true.

(A pause.)

RAKESH: You want approval.

TARA: I wanted it.

(Silence.)

TARA: Now I want room.

(That shifts everything.)

POOJA: And if we cannot give our blessing?

TARA: Then that will be sad.

(A beat.)
But it will not be the end of my life.

(Silence.)

POOJA: You would marry without us.

TARA: I would marry without permission.

(A pause. That lands harder.)

RAKESH: You are talking like we are tyrants.

TARA: No. I'm talking like someone who finally understands the difference between love and authority.

(A long silence.)

KAVYA: So that's it? Family means nothing? Community means nothing? Tradition means nothing?

TARA: I didn't say that.

KAVYA: Then what are you saying?

TARA: That none of those things should require my disappearance.

(Silence.)

AMIT: Maybe… maybe she should not meet them.

(Everyone turns.)

POOJA: **AMIT**...

AMIT: What? Why should she? To be polite? To prove she's open-minded? To perform doubt so we all feel respected?

(A beat.)

AMIT: If she knows, she knows.

KAVYA: That is not how families work.

AMIT: Maybe that's the problem.

KAVYA: What is that supposed to mean?

AMIT: It means maybe we call pressure “family” so often we don’t notice when it stops being love.

*(**KAVYA** stares at him, wounded.)*

KAVYA: And I’m sitting here as your wife, hearing this.

AMIT: I know.

KAVYA: So now I’m what? A symbol?

AMIT: No.

KAVYA: A warning?

AMIT: No.

KAVYA: Then say it properly.

(A pause.)

AMIT: I think you adjusted so well… no one ever asked what it cost you.

(Silence.)

*(**KAVYA** looks at him. Really looks at him. For the first time, she has no quick answer.)*

POOJA: This is getting out of hand.

RAKESH: **TARA,** sit down. Right now. We will speak calmly and decide properly.

TARA: There is nothing to decide.

RAKESH: There is in this house.

TARA: Not any more.

(A silence.)

POOJA: What does that mean?

*(**TARA** looks at them. When she speaks now, her voice is steady. Clear. Not loud.)*

TARA: It means I am not meeting the family.
It means I am not reconsidering Neil to make this easier for everyone else.
It means I am done presenting my life for approval like coursework.

(A pause.)

POOJA: So you have decided everything.

TARA: No.

(A beat.)
I decided very little.

(She looks at them.)

That's the point.

(Silence.)

RAKESH: And this is your final word?

(***TARA*** *studies him. Then after a beat,)*

TARA: No.

(The room shifts. They do not understand.)

POOJA: What?

TARA: You want something from me.

You want one more compromise.

One more gesture.

One more proof that I am still the good daughter.

(A beat.)

Fine.

(A stillness.)

TARA: I'll do it.

(Everyone freezes.)

POOJA: Do what?

TARA: Just this once.

*(****RAKESH*** *and* ***POOJA*** *glance at one another.* ***AMIT*** *looks wary.*

KAVYA *almost relaxes.)*

RAKESH: You will meet them?

TARA: No.

(A beat.)

I will do what this family has always asked of me.

I will think of you.

I will think of your worry, your reputation, your sleeplessness,

your fear of relatives, your need to feel the world still makes sense.

I will think of all of it.

Just this once.

(Silence.)

POOJA: **TARA,** what are you saying?

TARA: I'm saying I will carry all of that for one final evening.

And after tonight…

(She lets the pause sit.)

…every decision about my life will be mine.

No meetings.
No suggestions disguised as concern.
No emotional blackmail dressed as love.
No "what will people say."
No "we're only thinking of you."
No "just this once."

(A long, hard silence.)

TARA: If I give you tonight…
you give me the rest of my life.

(No one moves.)

POOJA: You can't speak to us like this.

TARA: I just did.

RAKESH: You are asking us to step aside.

TARA: Yes.

POOJA: We are your parents.

TARA: Yes.

POOJA: Then how can we not have a say?

TARA: Because a say is not the same as a right.

(Silence.)

RAKESH: And if we refuse this… arrangement?

(A beat.)

TARA: Then nothing changes.

(Silence.)

TARA: Which is why I am not asking.

(That lands. A deep, irreversible quiet.)

*(**POOJA** sits slowly. She looks smaller now, not weaker, just stripped of language. **RAKESH** remains upright, but his certainty has gone rigid.*

***AMIT** looks at **TARA**, then at the table, then at his own hands.*
***KAVYA** is motionless, caught between offence and recognition.)*

(No one speaks. The tea has gone cold.)

TARA: I love you.

(A pause.)

But I cannot keep proving it by disappearing.

(Silence.)

(*She picks up her bag.*

For a moment it seems someone will stop her.

No one does.

She walks to the edge of the room.

Stops.

Without turning)

TARA: How many “just this once” make a life?

Blackout.